

Sessile oak - quercus petraea

<http://www.forestry.gov.uk/website/oldsite.nsf/byunique/infd-5nlj46?Open&PrintFriendly=y>



The Oak is the largest of our native broad-leaved trees. Regarded as “kings of the forest”, Oaks are sturdy, tall with domed crowns. The broad rounded canopy has wide spreading thick lower branches. There are two native Oaks in Britain and the other is the Pedunculate oak (*Quercus robur*). Both have the very special characteristics of the leaves and acorns, although there are slight differences.

Age and size

Can grow over 40 m high, over 3m in diameter and often reach an age of 300 years old.

Bark The Greyish bark has vertical cracks forming shapes called “plates”



Flowers and seed

The acorn is the ripened fruit or seed of the flower. It looks like an egg in a cup. On the Pedunculate Oak the flowers and acorn are on a stalk called a “peduncle”.



Leaves

The wavy dark green lobed leaves are very distinctive.

Where and how does the Oak grow?

The Oak likes clay soils or sandy loam soils with plenty of humus. Sessile Oak is naturally more typical in the north and west, Pedunculate Oak on the clay soils further south and east. There has been so much large scale planting of both types that it is now hard to find these distinctions. The Oak is not always huge and tall like the great Oaks in the New Forest or on many private estates. In some conditions it can be stunted and grow into unusual, twisted forms. Many of the remaining Oaks of the old Sherwood Forest are like this.

Wildlife and the Oak

The Oak is a habitat and community on its own and provides for an enormous variety of plants, insects, birds, reptiles and mammals - and that is just above ground! It is late coming into leaf giving an open canopy that lets a lot of light through. This allows the ground flora to flourish. A whole range of grasses, flowering plants and mosses are able to grow and in turn become food for a variety of insects, birds and other animals.



In upland Oak woods you may find the Killarney fern, Wilson's pouchwort, the Chequered skipper butterfly, the Blue ground beetle. In a lowland mixed broad-leaved woodland you may even spot a

Dormouse.



Timber

The timber from Oak has great importance in terms of wood production in this country. The wood called brown, pollard or burr is brown in colour, strong and hard, extremely durable and is very easy to work with when green. It is an excellent wood to use for contact with the ground as it is very resistant.

Now used in boat and ship building, cabinet and furniture making, joinery and carving and as veneer and plywood. The building of traditional Oak framed buildings is also becoming popular again. The new Globe Theatre, London is made from Oak from the Forest of Dean and built in the tradition of that time. Oak sawdust is still used for smoking food to give flavour.



Old uses - The tanning industry was once the biggest user of oak wood. Also traditionally used for fencing, firewood, making charcoal and fuel for iron smelting. Some of the oldest timber framed buildings were made from Oak such as the original Shakespeare Globe Theatre. The Lords of the Isles in Scotland had a whole war fleet of Oak warships.

It takes a long time for an Oak to grow big enough to use the wood - sometimes as long as 150 years. In some places, Oak was commonly grown as "coppice" which means the trunk and branches were cut and new branches could grow again and then again. This gave smaller diameter wood which could be used after a few years, especially for fuel and making charcoal in the past. This type of woodland management is growing popular again, mainly because it greatly benefits wildlife.

A Poem: The Red Kite. (nest tucked in the wood of sessile hanging oak,)
Wales, Spring 1985. by Peter Hack. <http://www.gigrin.co.uk/redkitepoem-2001.html> | photograph. <http://www.rspb.org.uk/england>



A Red Kite hangs and slides
Along a stony ridge,
Perched on the sheer gust and bracing uplift,
Still on a windy hill sides slip.

It clings precarious, one of the last few, lone bird;
In its element on the breeze, imperious control haughty
Scouring the winter hill for carrion,
This century breeding pairs have not passed, a mere
forty,

He soars and swings,
On an angular down tipped wing,
Long tail forked and angled as a rudder,
Quiet, beautiful, languid effortlessness, a steady study on the buffets of the wind.

Faint, mournful whistle over the nest tucked in the wood of sessile hanging oak,
Where soggy mosses thicken on the slope,
Swallow tailed and russet, she circles hard,
On the steep hill backing up the hill at Abergwesyn,
Stretching out above the farm and yard.

Below, the toothless old farmer, shy, of strangers
Private and suspicious, nursing his broken English,
Barking, wagging collies, mud and a few cattle, his flock of ragged sheep,
Wales, land of ages; defeat and bitter, sweet, heroic stories
Memories and noble names across these wet stones steeped.

High above the farm the hawk pair are courting, spring has come at last,
In a retreat of rounded hills, above its Celtic bryn, this fortress fast,
This farm jealous, private place, by modernity beleaguered and entirely lacking any
sense of haste, or of the shiftless quality of fate,
Here hangs the future of a people, the family of the old tongue, an ancient line,
A psyche that runs unbroken back to druid and "stone age" time.

High above the hafod, circling together still are the regal pair,
Their movements echo synchronous, they lace a rhyme,
The swallow tailed, Barcud, the British kite soaring high,
This Celtic remnant, beautiful swing,
Whorls of dance across the empty, grey, rain threatening sky,
Hard hill's frost and a last winter grimace brightening.

Peter Hack

